PLAY GUIDE

The Cherry Orchard

Oct. 19 – Nov. 13, 1993

by Anton Chekhov

Indiana Repertory Theatre ★ 140 West Washington St. ★ Indianapolis, IN 46204-3465

The Life of Anton Chekhov

Anton Chekhov, considered by many to be Russia's greatest playwright, was born January 17, 1860, in Taganrog, a small port on the Sea of Azov in Russia. He was never a serf himself, for his grandfather had bought his family's freedom in 1841, twenty years before the abolition of serfdom in Russia. But life for the freed serfs was not easy, and young Anton experienced many of the hardships the former serfs had faced.

In 1875, Anton's father, who owned a grocery store, went bankrupt. To avoid serving a jail sentence, he fled to Moscow. Anton remained in Taganrog to study, supporting himself as a tutor. After finishing his studies, he rejoined his family in Moscow and began studying medicine at the university in 1879. The young Chekhov supported his family through writing short sketches for a satiric newspaper and minor magazines under the pen name *Antosha Chekhonte.*

In 1884, Chekhov received his degree in medicine and began work as a doctor in a rural district outside Moscow. In December he suffered a hemorrhage, the first symptom of the consumption (what we today call tuberculosis) which would eventually take his life.

The next year Chekhov met Suvorin, editor of the *St. Petersburg Gazette,* and began writing for the influential daily using his own name. He was now making good money and was able to purchase a house. Suvorin published Chekhov's third collection of stories, *At Twilight,* which established his reputation as a popular humorist and writer.

In 1888 Chekhov was awarded the Pushkin Prize by the Imperial Academy of Sciences for his volumes of short stories. That year he made a journey across Siberia, visiting and reporting on the penal colony on the island of Sakhalin. From the information he gathered, he wrote a book; it was so effective, the government sent a commission of inquiry to the island.

Meanwhile Chekhov's health continued to deteriorate. No longer able to hide his illness from his family, in 1892 he decided they would move to the country. For 13,000 rubles he bought an estate fifty miles south of Moscow. The excitement of being a landowner gave him encouragement to cultivate the soil and provide medical care for the peasants. He was appointed district doctor when an epidemic of cholera broke out.

In 1895 he met noted Russian author Leo Tolstoy and they became friends. Within the next year his play *The Seagull* opened in St. Petersburg, surviving only five performances after a disastrous first night. Chekhov became tremendously discouraged and made a vow never to have any of his plays performed again. He also suffered a severe hemorrhage of the lungs. Finally forced to recognize his condition, he began to spend his winters in the south of France where the weather was milder.

In 1898, after his father's death, he purchased a house near Yalta and moved permanently with his mother and sister to this warmer climate. After meeting Vladimir Nemirovich-Denchenko and Konstantin Stanislavsky, founders of the Moscow Art Theatre, Chekhov broke his vow and allowed them to produce one of his plays. *The Seagull* was produced in Moscow with great success; *Uncle Vanya* followed the next year. Chekhov was greatly impressed with the company as well as with its leading lady, Olga Knipper, whom he married in 1901, the year *Three Sisters* was produced.

During this period Chekhov finally met Maxim Gorky, with whom he had been corresponding for some time; they formed a close and lasting friendship. When Gorky's membership in the Academy of Sciences was revoked in 1902, Chekhov, who had himself been elected only two years earlier, resigned in protest. In 1903 he was elected President of the Society of Russian Literature. In January 1904 *The Cherry Orchard* was produced; that July, after two heart attacks, Chekhov died of tuberculosis at the German health resort of Badenweiler. He is buried in the cemetery of the Novodevichiy Monastery in Moscow. ★

The scenic and costume designers for The Cherry Orchard *are husband-and-wife team Simon Pastukh and Galina Solovyeva, who immigrated to Indianapolis from St. Petersburg in 1992. Above we see Simon's model for his scenic design, with its delicate scrim walls and its floor covered with cherry blossoms (photo by Garry Chilluffo).*

Designers at Work

Artistic Director Libby Appel has collaborated with an enormously talented husband-and-wife design team who have created the costumes and scenery for *The Cherry Orchard.* Simon Pastukh and Galina Solovyeva bring some unique qualifications to their design work on this play: they are recent Russian emigrants who bring with them not only an intimate knowledge of the work of Chekhov, but lifelong exposure to the kinds of people, clothing, landscape, architecture, furniture, and habits that Chekhov so lovingly characterizes in his plays.

Previous to their arrival in Indianapolis in 1992, Simon was one of the most renowned set designers and artists in St. Petersburg (formerly Leningrad), beginning his career in 1975 after graduating from the Leningrad Institute of Theatre and Cinematography. He designed sets for over 120 ballet, opera, and theatre productions, some of which toured all over the world. As a painter, he has had exhibitions of his work mounted in Moscow, Hamburg, St. Petersburg, Belgrade, and Prague, as well as Indianapolis.

Galina also launched her career in 1975, following graduation from the Leningrad Institute where she met her husband. She worked for the famed Kirov Ballet and also designed costumes for the Bolshoi Ballet and the Maly Theatre as well as theatres in Bulgaria, Poland, and Korea.

The design process began last May when director Libby Appel, the designers, the composer, the choreographer, and the dramaturg met to begin discussing the play. Appel viewed the goal of the design elements as to capture things as we recall them in memory, in a simplified, emblematic manner that wouldn't necessarily be realistic. She wanted a dreamy quality to the production and talked about elegance and impressionism and a painterliness which would capitalize on texture and on the movement of light. Based on this and much more conversation, the designers went off to do their imaginative work.

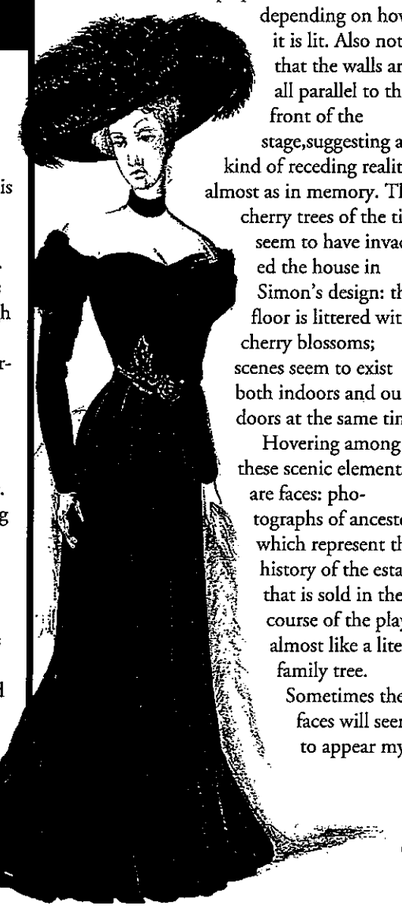
Simon and Galina's scenic and costume designs might best be described as abstract realism. The set, which has elements of realism in it (columned doorways, period furniture) is also quite abstract: the walls are made of scrim, a special material which allows the viewer to see the surface as opaque or as translucent, depending on how it is lit. Also notice that the walls are all parallel to the front of the stage,suggesting a kind of receding reality almost as in memory. The cherry trees of the title seem to have invaded the house in Simon's design: the floor is littered with cherry blossoms; scenes seem to exist both indoors and outdoors at the same time.

Hovering among all these scenic elements are faces: photographs of ancestors which represent the history of the estate that is sold in the course of the play, almost like a literal family tree.

Sometimes these faces will seem to appear mysteriously; at other times they will magically recede from view. All these elements are meant to physicalize the moods and themes of the play: the disuse of the once-great house, the spirits of bygone ancestors, the blending of past, present, and future, even the maze-like state in which the Gayevs seem to find themselves over the impending sale of their beloved orchard.

Galina's costumes are likewise drawn from abstract realism: the line and shape of the costumes are all historically accurate to the 1903 date of the play's composition, but the color palate of the costumes is tightly controlled to bring out the themes of the play. Most of the color selections are muted and meant to suggest the coloring of old, sepia-toned photographs. The first-act costumes are dark and almost monochromatic in their black and brown hues. The second-act costumes are lighter in color and span the sepia tones: buff, ochre, taupe. The third act, which takes place during the dance, introduces some saturated color use for the first time. But Liubov herself is dressed like a bride, in white. The inappropriateness of her attire is purposeful: she doesn't know how to behave in these circumstances. The fourth act returns the color palate to the dark tones of the first act. As you note these color shifts, try to understand how these subtleties in tone manipulation influence how you feel about the mood of the play.

Mastering the ability to transmit or read subtleties of character and location through the creation and viewing of scenery and costumes is what makes live theatre such an interactive art form for artists and audience. But in the case of the designers, we the viewers rarely get to see them; we see only the results of their work. *The Cherry Orchard* has provided a particularly exciting arena for this sharing of culture knowledge between native Russian designers and an American audience experiencing the brilliance of Chekhov's work. ★



Costume design by Galina Solovyeva: Madame Ranyevskaya, Act I.

SYNOPSIS: *The Cherry Orchard*

Anton Chekhov was born in 1860, a time when peasants, known as serfs, were owned by landowners. The serfs, who accounted for eighty percent of the population, were rioting because of hunger and oppression. These revolts, many led by university students, grew more intense, and in 1861 (the same year the American Civil War began) the system of serf ownership was abolished .

The freedom of the peasants ultimately gave rise to a middle-class group of merchants and industrialists. With the expansion of the middle class came the disintegration of the upper class. Chekhov incorporated many of these sociological conditions into his play *The Cherry Orchard.*

Act I opens at dawn in the nursery of the Gayev mansion, where the audience sees Lopakhin waiting for the return of Madame Liubov Ranyevskaya and her daughter Anya. Madame Ranyevskaya has been living in Paris for five years, driven from home by the death of her husband and her seven-year-old son. Two other characters greet the returning party: Liubov's adopted daughter Varya, who has remained behind to take care of the house, and Trofimov, a graduate student and the former tutor to Liubov's dead son.

Liubov has returned to Russia because she has run out of money; worse, the estate, which has been in the family for three generations, is to be auctioned off if the mortgage is not paid. Lopakhin, a modern businessman whose parents and grandparents were serfs on the estate, has devised a plan which will save the Gayevs from losing all their land. They need to subdivide their cherry orchard and sell the lots in order to avoid total ruin. The Gayev family realizes the necessity of raising the money, but cannot bear to sell the cherry orchard—a symbol of the family's more glorious past.

Act II opens a few weeks later outdoors. The governess Carlotta, the valet Yasha, the accountant Yepikhodov, and the maid Dunyasha each desire to move up in the world. Having worked for the Gayev family for a number of years, they are accustomed to a certain lifestyle; but they won't be able to maintain these exalted levels if the estate is sold.

When Liubov, her brother Leonid, and Lopakhin enter, the conversation shifts to the issue of subdividing the land. Lopakhin continues to give the same advice, and the family again rejects the offer, ignoring the urgency of the situation. The characters see each others' follies but fail to see their own. A mysterious sound, like a breaking string, comes from a distance, startling and frightening members of the group. The act ends with a romantic interlude between Anya and Trofimov, who spouts his philosophical views as the sun sets.

Act III begins with the music and dancing of a party. The family is anxiously waiting for Leonid and Lopakhin's return from the auction,hoping that Leonid has saved the estate. That hope is shattered when Lopakhin and Leonid return and, much to everyone's dismay, they learn the entire estate has been sold. Not only that, it has been purchased by Lopakhin.

The news is overwhelming for the Gayev family. Leonid, who has gotten drunk, goes straight to his room. Liubov, devastated, settles in a chair and weeps bitterly. Varya, realizing she is no longer in control, throws her keys to the floor and exits. Meanwhile Lopakhin is overwhelmed by conflicting emotions, but he is thrilled that he has purchased the estate where his family once served as serfs. Only Anya is hopeful for the future. She has come to realize that life in the cherry orchard is over for her and her family, and she is ready to move on.

Act IV opens on a cold day in Autumn following the sale; the nursery is bare except for a few pieces of furniture and suitcases. Madame Ranyevskaya is returning to Paris and her feckless lover. Leonid is taking a job in a bank. Anya is going to school with Trofimov. Although they are left alone together, Varya and Lopakhin miss their chance to make marriage plans. Varya leaves to work as a housekeeper for a family in another town; Lopakhin plans to tear down the house, clear the orchard, subdivide the land, and sell the plots for summer villas. The family has planned to send the aging butler Firs to a nursing home; but after Leonid and Liubov bid farewell to the house and each other, the audience discovers Firs has been left behind. Locked in the empty house, realizing everyone is gone, the old man collapses into a chair, confused and very ill. We hear the sound of axes chopping down the cherry orchard. Then, the sound like a breaking string is heard again, dying away in the distance. ★

On Translating Chekhov

Chekhov in a group portrait with the company of the Moscow Art Theater.

Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* is written in Russian, so of course the text must be translated in order for English-speaking actors and audiences to enjoy it. Many translations of Chekhov's plays exist: in fact, most theatre practitioners agree that a foreign text must be retranslated every forty years or so because spoken language changes sufficiently in that period of time to warrant revision. And despite the fact that all of the existing translations of *The Cherry Orchard* are, of course, based on the same text, individual translations can vary drastically in tone, in word choices, rhythms, and in degree of colloquialism. Many of the English-language translations of Chekhov's plays have been done by British translators, so the characters' speech sounds foreign to Americans and rather like "Masterpiece Theatre." The staff of the IRT was interested in finding a translation that captured the vitality of Chekhov for American audiences while respecting the Russian setting and the historical moment in which the play was written.

We were fortunate to come across a new, unpublished translation of *The Cherry Orchard* created by Russian scholar-actor-poet Paul Schmidt. The fact that Schmidt is himself an actor contributes significantly to the "speakability" of the text: it sounds wonderful and full and not at all foreign in the mouths of American actors. Schmidt wrote, in an introduction to a translation he did of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*: "When reading Chekhov's plays I have always been struck by the absolute ordinariness of his language, and by the humdrum everyday actions of his characters. His entire art is the creation of extraordinary human depths out of the surface banalities of everyday life. . . . Chekhov's characters speak quite ordinary Russian. Even after a hundred years, it seems remarkably simple, colloquial, and accessible. . . . I wanted to make a translation for American actors in the kind of plain language Chekhov actually wrote. . . ."

In a further explanation, Schmidt asserts his interest in the universality of Chekhov's plays and suggests that producing the plays in a restrictively "Russian" style only removes their innate ability to affect us. Therefore, he uses a minimal number of foreign expressions, finding instead vibrant corollaries in American language.

Just to give you a sense of what Schmidt means by everyday, American language, compare these two passages. The first comes from an earlier translation of a speech of Lopakhin's:

"It's true my father was a peasant, and here I am in a white waistcoat and yellow boots. Like a pig's nozzle showing up in a row of wedding cakes. . . . It's just that I'm rich, lots of money for sure, but if you really think about it and look into it, you'll know I'm just a peasant through and through. . . ."

This is Schmidt's rendering of the same passage:

"Well, my father was poor, but look at me now, all dressed up, brand new suit and white shoes. Silk purse out of a sow's ear, I guess. . . . I'm rich now, got lots of money, but when you think about it, I guess I'm still just a poor boy from the country."

Notice the economy of language in Schmidt's version, also the use of American idiom, rather than the literal translation of the pig's nozzle metaphor, which is foreign to American listeners. This is a good example of Schmidt's technique throughout the play: keep the language moving, remove extraneous words, find American equivalents for the aphorisms, and keep in mind how the language will work in speech, not merely on the page. The musicality of Chekhov shines through in Schmidt's translations and allows us to feel a real kinship with a group of plays that have been too frequently made to seem foreign by formal translations. ✦

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